



DIET

EATING RIGHT BEFORE (AND AFTER) COMPETITION

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We've had lots of parents asking us how to get their swimmers to eat properly before competition. Fussy eaters, nervous kids, and timing make it a challenge to get the right food in your body so you can race your best. While every athlete is different, we can provide a few rules that should make pre-race eating easier and better.

Your pre-race meal serves two purposes: to stop you from getting hungry before and during your races, and to keep up the energy stores in your muscles so you can perform at your best in every event.

Skipping breakfast before heats will hurt your performance, so if you are not a big eater in the morning, either because you don't feel hungry or because butterflies make you feel full, then start slowly and keep trying to find something you like until you find the right fuel for you.

A quick rule if you are getting stomach problems at meets is to avoid high-fibre and fatty foods. You can try liquid meals like those made for athletes or you can make your own shake using protein powder or skim milk powder with fruit or yogurt. But whatever you do, don't try something new the morning of a meet. Training isn't just where you work to get your times down; it can also be an opportunity to try what nutrition works best for you.

The Basics

The key to eating right at a big meet actually starts much sooner than your breakfast before heats or even your dinner the night before. Eating a proper diet during training will ensure that you have good energy stores in your body before the meet even starts. In the past, big pasta dinners the night before a meet were considered a must, but this probably has a negligible effect on events that are short, like swim races. The key is starting out with, and keeping up, glycogen stores in your body to fuel your muscles every day.

During swimming, your muscles burn fat and glucose, which you get from the glycogen stores in your muscles and glucose in the blood. When you run out of the glucose in your blood during exercise, your body can reach into the stores to get more to

keep you going. The longer your race, the more glycogen starts to factor in.

Overnight, when your body is fasting, glycogen stores are lowered. If you have to get up and swim heats without eating, you are starting with a half-full tank. But if you eat first, you top up the stores so your body can last longer.

Of course, you don't want a full tummy when you are racing, so you should eat your full meal one to three hours before your race so your body has

Here are a few suggestions for pre-race eating:

1 hour or less before competition

real fruit or vegetable juice

fresh fruit such as apples, watermelon, peaches, grapes, or oranges

half a sports drink

2 to 3 hours before competition

fresh fruit, real fruit or vegetable juices

bread, bagels, with small amounts of butter or cream cheese

low-fat yogurt

a sports drink

3 to 4 hours before competition

fresh fruit, real fruit or vegetable juices

bread, bagels, baked potatoes, cereal with low-fat milk

low-fat yogurt

sandwiches with a small amount of peanut butter, lean meat, or low-fat cheese

a sports drink

time to digest your food. If you are nervous, it may take longer to digest, so each person will vary.

Hypoglycaemic Backlash?

There are two kinds of carbs that you can eat to boost your glycogen. Some give you a big surge—high glycaemic index (GI) foods like glucose, bread, and bananas—and some give you sustained energy—low GI foods like beans and lentils. There are contradicting studies on whether eating high GI foods right before a race cause a sugar-low backlash or not. A lot of this depends on you and how long your race is.

What you eat at the last minute before a race probably isn't going to make as much difference as eating a proper meal before, so try to replace glycogen after and between races, and eat healthy during training.

High GI foods are better after you race since they replenish glycogen faster than low GI foods. You should be eating these foods within 15 minutes after a race. If you have another event, even eating something small or drinking something will help you recover from your first race and keep you in top shape for your second one.

Caffeine and Junk Food

Caffeine is a stimulant, but caffeine does not work for everyone. Some people are very sensitive to caffeine and too much can lead to stomach upset or dehydration, which can really hurt your performance. But for some people in middle-distance events, caffeine has been shown to improve your ability to pick it up at the end of a race. It's up to you on this one—a lot will depend on your age and your event.

Whatever you do, don't drink pop to get your caffeine kick! Junk food, often found at pool concession stands, should be avoided completely.

Stay away from deep-fried foods, chips, or chocolate bars. They are high in fat and are hard to digest.

Water, Water, Water!

Just because you don't see yourself sweating at a swim meet, it doesn't mean that you aren't losing a lot of fluid when you race. It is crucial to be fully hydrated before the meet starts and to stay that way throughout the competition.

One set of guidelines to follow for consuming enough water during exercise is as follows: about 1 hour before exercise, drink 1-2 cups of water; while exercising, drink about 2 cups per hour (half a cup every 15 minutes); and after exercising, another 2 cups or more if you feel thirsty.

Of course, waiting until you feel thirsty is not the way to stay hydrated. If you wait until you feel thirsty to drink fluids, it is too late as you are already dehydrated. Also, water is not the only thing you lose during exercise. Electrolytes (such as sodium and potassium) are also lost during intense activity when you sweat. Drinking a sports drink before and after your races will help you replace these electrolytes, as well as provide fuel for your muscles that break down during racing.

The Final Word

The bottom line is that you are unique, and copying other swimmers isn't necessarily going to get you to perform at your best. Just like getting enough sleep and training hard are things you do to swim fast, what you do or don't put in your body is also crucial. You need to eat before you race, so keep on trying to find what works best for you. Otherwise, all that work you put into your workouts will be lost come race time. ■